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SPEECH BY THE SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, MR. S. DHANABALAN, AT THE ST. GEORGE'S TAMIL CENTRE CULTURAL SHOW ON SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 1978, AT 6 P.M.

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Language sets us apart from the animals, and is the basis for much of our self-expression and interpretation of life. It is also the basis of our different cultures. Small wonder then that if we have learnt a language well at our mother's knee, we are reluctant to lose it to the winds. We keep returning to it as a form of identification with a people, enjoying the pleasure and intimacy that comes from one group sharing one language.

However, we are aware as well that our mother tongue alone is not sufficient in Singapore. We know too well the need to use the English language for economic survival and technical progress, but the need to keep alive our native languages is a deep and genuine one too.

As a minority group and in the face of odds against majority groups and their languages, we are naturally anxious to keep our own tradition alive. This anxiety is, perhaps, more keenly felt by the older among us, who fear the complete loss of a noble culture and tradition that is among the oldest in the world.

We must beware of two dangers in our reactions. One is to resign ourselves to what appears to be an inevitable process of deculturalization in a modernising society. The past, we may resignedly tell ourselves, has no place in the present. The younger among us may often take this as an excuse not to study the Tamil language, which becomes difficult as it is increasingly left unpractised.

The other equally dangerous reaction is an overriding zeal to protect and promote our language and our customs. We begin to crusade for things Tamil. We insist that our children become proficient in the knowledge and practice of Tamil and Tamil customs. We teach our children that Tamil is the repository of all civilized conduct and culture. In our zeal to promote our own language, it is easy to aggressively put down other cultures, and to glorify our own.

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This is, ironically, a defensive reaction, and reflects poorly on us.

Some put down not only the other cultures of the world but become so ultra Tamil that they put down other non-Tamil facets of Indian culture. It is timely to sound a warning here — there have been instances when we have allowed visitors from South India to introduce among Singapore Tamils issues arising out of language differences in India. If we become unknowingly drawn into these factions, we will in fact be importing a South Indian fracas into Singapore. No matter what our allegiance to our cultural roots and heritage, it is a different matter to become embroiled in quarrels or trends that have no place here.

Let us remain open to all facets of Indian culture as well as the other cultures represented in Singapore. While we take just pride in our language, we must also remember that other groups too have their roots. The language that separates man from animals can also separate man from man. Let us remind ourselves to use our language intelligently, to keep ourselves in touch with our cultural roots, but not to isolate ourselves from the other cultural heritages of Singapore.